

THE MEANING OF “FIRST FRUITS” IN REVELATION 14:4

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Abstrak

Arti dari frase “buah sulung” dalam Wahyu 14: 4 menyita banyak perhatian dari para ahli Alkitab. Bukan hanya karena sifatnya yang menarik dari kitab Apokaliptik dalam dalam Perjanjian Baru ini, tetapi juga karena keingintahuan untuk memahami kelompok umat Allah yang telah ditebus. Untuk menemukan arti dari “buah sulung” dalam Wahyu 14:4, metodologi penelitian ini adalah pendekatan penyelidikan historis-gramatikal terhadap latar belakang dan konteks Wahyu 14. Hasil temuan dari penelitian ini adalah: Pertama, 144.000 adalah kualitas terbaik atau pilihan atau kepenuhan umat Allah sebagai penghormatan dan kurban persembahan kepada Allah. Kelompok ini adalah orang kudus yang akan dituai pada akhir zaman. Kedua, “buah sulung” di sini menunjukkan bahwa tuaian yang lebih besar akan dikumpulkan dan itu bukan hanya sekedar hasil tebusan dan penyelamatan. Mereka adalah perwakilan dari orang-orang kudus Allah yang telah ditebus diantara manusia. (14: 3-4).

Key Word: *First Fruits, 1440.000, Revelation*

Introduction

The meaning of Rev 14:4 has long occupied the attention of scholars, not only by good feature of its essential interest, but because of its importance for the understanding of the group of God’s people who have redeemed to God and the Lamb. Rev 14:4 reads, “These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as first fruits to God and the Lamb.”¹ Despite the scriptural support for the using of the word², the statement “first fruits” in Rev 14:4 have concerned the attention of many scholars.

Commentators and scholars, over the years, have attempted to solve some issues related to the word “first fruits” in Rev 14:4; for example, this word expresses the totality of believers throughout the ages who finally receive their full and final redemption, and how it has a connection with the group in Rev 7, which represents the complete number of God’s people.³ Another concern has been the syntax of the

¹All biblical texts cited are taken from the New International Version (NIV), unless otherwise noted.

²Exo 23:16; 23:19; 34:22; 34:26; Lev 2:12; 2:14; 23:17; 23:29; Num 18:12; 18:13; 28:26; Deu 18:2; 26:2; 26:10; 2Ch 31:5; Neh 10:35; 12:44; 13:31; Psa 78:51; 105:36; Pro 3:9; Jer 2:3; Eze 44:30; Rom 8:23; 11:16; 1 Cor 15:20; 15:23; Jam 1:18.

³Bauckham sees a direct connection with Rev 6:11, “Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.” See Bauckham, R, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*.

verse. Some find the meaning of the word has a correlation with other verses in the Scripture. For this reason, it seems fair to present representative ideas which cut across the different school of interpretation.

In the study of the identification of ἀπαρχή in Rev 14:4. Two major questions are still in need of further explanation: (1) what is a better meaning of “first fruits” in this context. (2) who is really as “first fruits” in Rev 14:4? This study will seek satisfactory answer to these questions. In order to answer the question above, the methodology of this study is a historical-grammatical investigation approach toward the background setting and the context of Rev 14:4.

Review of Literature

There are various perspectives shared by different scholars and commentators from different backgrounds on the meaning of “first fruits” in Rev 14:4. This review of literature primarily focuses on scholars’ reactions for the meaning of “first fruits” of Rev 14:4 in connection to the context of entire passage of Rev 14:1-5, other passages of Revelation, and some the OT events background.

The divergent interpretations held by different scholars have been classified into related groups. Some scholars consider “They were purchased from among men and offered as first fruits to God and the Lamb” in the context of sacrificial offering of themselves to God and to the Lamb. For example, Robert H. Mounce, a Preterist-futurist, he argues that the 144,000 has purchased by the blood of the Lamb (4:9), they are an offering to God. In his explanation, the “first fruits” is the third figure of the redeemed people. As the third figure of the 144,000; a special group which standing on the Mount Zion with the Lamb.⁴

Mounce further defines that the group of the first fruits in different way. He understands this group who they are celibates and virgins. This view considers to the first clause of Rev 14:4. He states “That certain segments of the early church came to exalt celibacy is perfectly true. Jesus had spoken with approval of eunuchs (Matt 19:12), and Paul wished that all people the gift of continence so as to serve without

(Edinburgh: Clark, 1993), 55-56. Further, Beale notices that the 144,000 is the complete number. The numbers here, 12 X 12 X 1000, stress completeness. The full number of the martyr (144,000) is completed in this interval between the very approach of judgment (6:17) and the scene at the opening of the seventh seal, when all heaven is silent so that God may listen to the prayers of the saints and at last avenge of their blood (Rev 8:1, 3-5). See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 310 – 311.

⁴The first figure stressed the fidelity of the redeemed and the second their discipleship, the third speaks of the sacrificial offering. Although the Greek word “avparch.”, translated as “first fruits” originally meant a token offering to God that released the harvest that followed for secular use, it had come to signify more often than not in the LXX no more than an offering or gift. In the OT the “first fruits” were the first and best parts of the harvest offered to God. See Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 266-268.

hindrance the cause of Christ (1 Cor 7:1; 7:2).”⁵ This view seems to suggest that the “first fruits” is the 144,000 which has synonymous with the celibates and virgins.

Although sharing the same school of thought Osborne understands the 144,000 are presented to God and the Lamb as first fruits which address as sacrificial image. That refers to “the saints of tribulation period seen as an offering to God guaranteeing the final harvest of all believers.”⁶ He identifies the first fruits is the same group with the 144,000 that explained in Rev 7. The cluster of redeemed that described as holy offering to God and to the Lamb. In spite of his definition of the 144,000, he further expresses ambivalence significance of this group. He divides the victorious people into two groups, those are “a primary and a secondary thrust: primarily the victorious saints of the great tribulation and secondarily the people of God down through the ages”⁷

Fiorenza also sees the first fruits in this way. She has a suggestion that this phrase is looked from previous verses. She notices the explicit interpretation of the vision of John in Rev 14:4-5 does not center on the figure of the Lamb or on Mount Zion but on the identity of the 144,000. They are said to be the first fruits of the harvest, the perfect offering and gift for God. They are the true followers because they refuse to participate in the lie and deception of the beast. Further, she identifies the 144,000 are redeemed from the earth, which suffers from the eschatological wrath of God. It is probably refer to the eschatological protection of the redeemed; a protection already promised in 7:1-8 and 11:1-2.⁸

With his idealist-spiritualist perspective, Poslo Richard also thinks that the elite group of 144,000 describes as the first fruits for God in Rev 14:4. These people of God are portrayed as the organized God’s people that are resisting the beast, but they are scarcely the beginning or the first fruits of a multitude that will later follow their example. In heaven they are uncountable.⁹

Another metaphorical meaning of the first fruits is advanced by G. K. Beale, an idealist. Beale defines first fruits in Rev 14:4 as “a small group of Christian martyrs living at the end of history who are foreshadowing of a greater ingathering of

⁵Mounce, 266.

⁶Osborne, 531.

⁷Osborne, 525. He identifies the first fruits with a primary thrust. It addresses to the first fruits of the God’s people who pass through the great tribulation. Another group that lives of all the ages is identified as secondary thrust.

⁸Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, *Revelation Vision of a Just Word. Proclamation Commentaries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 88.

⁹”In Rev 14:4 those ransomed as the first fruits of the human race for God and the Lamb. This is the only appearance of the term “firstfruits” in Revelation. In 1 Cor 15:20, Paul says that the risen of Christ is the first fruit of those who fell asleep, that is, he is the first fruit of those who will rise later. Likewise in 2 Thess 2:13 it is said that God chose the community as first fruit, that is, as the first of a group to follow. See Poslo Richard, *Apocalypse. A People’s Commentary on the Book of Revelation*. (Marykoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 118-121.

more believers later, which could be narrated in the harvest of 14:14-20.”¹⁰ In addition, G. B. Caird has similarity ideas that support Beale. He describes the first fruits as a symbol of the holiness to which the whole nation was called. He connects this context to the Ministry of Jesus Christ as the holy and true sacrifice to redeem human beings of the world. In the New Testament Jesus is called first fruits because his resurrection was token and guarantee of a greater ingathering, and the Spirit is called first fruits because it is the pledge of the full inheritance to come. The ceremonial purity of the warrior enables to make an easy transit from the language of battle to the language of sacrifice. The martyrs have been ransomed from all mankind to be first fruits.¹¹

Another scholar supports and makes an additional of this view is Quispel. He thinks that “more improbable variants of this view are that the first fruits are Jewish Christian of the early church, to be followed a harvest of Gentile converts.”¹² John S. Walvoord, a dispensationalist-futurist has a further perspective. He understands that the first fruits here is a remnant of Jewish believers to be followed by the salvation of the whole nation¹³ or of many among the nations;¹⁴ or the Old Testament saints to be followed by the New Testament saints.¹⁵

Leon Morris, a preterist, suggests the idea on the view of first fruits as the church of God himself. In Rev 14:4, the thought of belonging to God is the primary idea. He states that “James sees the church as a kind of first fruits of his creatures (Jas 1:18) and it something like John has in mind. The church belongs to God. Her calling is to be consecrated to Him.”¹⁶ In addition, George E. Ladd expresses the meaning of the first fruits should refer to the resurrection of Jesus of all the saints.

First fruits can be used of a total group with a view to their total consecration to God. “In this sense, all Christians are viewed as “a kind of first fruits of his

¹⁰G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary (NITGC). (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 742.

¹¹G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*. Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1966), 180 -181.

¹²G. Quispel, *The Secret Book of Revelation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 85.

¹³John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary*. (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 216.

¹⁴H. Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming* (New York: Bantam), 187.

¹⁵E. Corsini, *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1983), 265-266.

¹⁶Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Edited by. R. V. G. Tasker. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 178.

creatures” (Jas 1:18). There is no thought in the present passage that the redeemed are first installment of men with the salvation of all to follow.”¹⁷

The last view holds that the first fruits related to the word ἀπαρχομαι, “to make beginning in sacrifice,” “to offer first fruits.”¹⁸ This perspective applied the first fruits to the 144,000 and it should be understood in First, the first fruits as being an installment or pledge of two ways. the great harvest. Second, it has a simple meaning, the first fruits as being a gift or offering.¹⁹

Literary Structure of the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation lends itself to a structural study. Scholars have investigated over the years and there is no definite consensus on this issue. Some contributors to structural studies of the Book of Revelation can be seen as follows.

John W. Bowman presents a drama approach with a sevenfold a dramatic structure. Each of the seven acts contains seven scenes.²⁰ He postulates these seven acts and forty-nine scenes in Revelation because of the importance of the number seven. While the sevens are derived from a Hebrew Christian background, the drama is borrowed from the Greco-Roman stage. He selects 14:1-5 as the center of Revelation and calls it the fourth scene of the fourth act.²¹

Kenneth A. Strand advocates a chiasmic structure consisting of eight basic visions beside a prologue and epilogue. In his view, the Book of Revelation has two

¹⁷George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary of on the Revelation of John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 192.

¹⁸The ancient Israelites offered first fruits to the Lord, both as personal (Deut. 26:1–11) and as national (Lev. 23:10, 17) offerings. The national offering also had typical significance (see on 1 Cor. 15:20). The 144,000 are those who are victors in the great conflict with the beast and his image (see on ch. 14:1). In the LXX ἀπαρχή is most frequently the translation of the Heb. תְּרוּמָה, “a contribution,” “an offering.” In Ex 25:2,3 תְּרוּמָה is used for the contribution of the children of Israel for the building of the sanctuary. Frequently *hamuret* describes the “heave offering” (see Num. 5:9, where the LXX has ἀπαρχή). Ancient inscriptions show that ἀπαρχή was commonly used for a “gift” to a goddess, without any reference to time. Where ἀπαρχή is the translation of תְּרוּמָה there is also no reference to time. The 144,000 may thus be considered as “firstfruits” either in the sense of being a part of a larger harvest or in the sense of being a gift, or offering, to God. See *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol 7. Rev.ed. Edited by Francis D. Nichol (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978), 826-27.

¹⁹SDABC, 826.

²⁰John Wick Bowman, *The Drama of the Book of Revelation: An Account of the Book with a New Testament Translation in the Language of Today*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 76-98.

²¹John Wick Bowman, “The Revelation to John: Its Dramatic Structure and Message,” *Interpretation* 9 (1955), 436-453.

major parts, the first one reaching up to the end of chap. 14 and discussing historical events, and the second one starting with 15:1 and pointing to the eschatological events. Each of one of the eight visions starts with a “victorious-introduction scene.” Then follows a “basic prophetic description.” Vision 2 to 7 furthermore contain an “interlude” and an “eschatological culmination.”²² Strand do not place a central unit in his chiastic structure. He mirrors the historical visions to the eschatological visions.

Joel N. Musvosvi proposes a chiastic structure divided in nine parts. He arranges parallelism and makes a central piece. He puts “cosmic conflict” (11:19-15:4) as the “thematic center of Revelation.”²³ Rev. 11:19 mentions the opening of the God’s temple to introduce the vision that begins in 12:1. Then, Rev. 15:1-4 presents the song of victory of those who overcome the beast of chap. 13, and a celebration after the harvest of the earth. In addition, Edwin Reynold sees chapters 12-15 are consisted of mix both historical and eschatological events.²⁴

Backgrounds of “First Fruits”

Hebrew Old Testament and LXX

Two Hebrew words in the Old Testament are referred to “first fruits.” The first is בכורים or bikkûrîm. It occurs seventeen times in the Hebrew text that is translated different term in the LXX. First, πρωτογένημα for “first fruits or feast of the first fruits.” This word points out to “first ripe grain and fruit.”²⁵ The second LXX translation is ἀπαρχή for “first fruits or first offering.” It refers to first portion of grain or fruit harvest or flocks which has been set aside for offering.²⁶

The word בכורים (bikkûrîm) always appears in the masculine plural form. The term itself has various nuances of meaning in the OT²⁷. However, the most often uses is to deal with a literal portion of the agricultural harvest. The portion of the

²²Kenneth A. Strand “The ‘Spotlight-On-Last-Events’ Section in the Book of Revelation,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 27 (1989), 201-221.

²³Joel N. Musvosvi, *Syllabus for NTST 670 The Book of Revelation*, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, 2004.

²⁴Edwin Reynolds, “The Seven-Headed Beast of Revelation 17.” *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 6 (2003): 34-50.

²⁵Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, “protogénima” *A Greek-English lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

²⁶Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida (eds), “aparchê” *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament* (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1989).

²⁷The first produce of the soil (Exod. 23:16, 19;34:26; Num. 28:16; Neh. 10:35; 13:31), specifically to wheat (Exod. 34:22), the products of grain (dough, Ezek. 44:30, loaves of bread Lev. 23:17; 23:20), to fruits in general (Num. 18:13; Ezek. 44:30), to figs (Nah. 3:12), to grapes (Num. 13:20); sometimes it simply indicates “early ripe” (Lev 2:14; 2 Kings. 4:42).

harvest refers to the fruit or grain which was harvested and offered to God according to the priest’s prescription.

The term בכורים renders also to the word בְּכֹר or Bükör which means “first born.” Israelite also acknowledged to bring the offering of the first fruit of every tree and bring the first born of the sons, cattle, and flocks (Neh. 10:36,36). The provision was made to provide the redemption of the firstborn of people and animals (Exod. 13:2-16; Num. 3:12-16).

The second Hebrew word is רֵאשִׁית or rē’sīt, which usually translated “first” or “beginning” of a series. It occurs fifty one times in the OT. This word comes from the root רָשָׁא or (rō’s) that means “head.” It translated as ἀπαρχή in the LXX. The substantive based on this expression is translated “first fruits,” which the specific reference to processed product and its quality rather than in the raw state²⁸. In addition, this term also has a meaning figuratively rather than literally. For instance, Israel is the first fruits of the Lord’s harvest (Jer. 2:3). These expressions of the phrase can mean in the sense of “choicest or the best.”

In sum, first fruit has significant religious meaning to the OT people. First fruit of agricultural harvest, livestock, first born of people or cattle belonged to the Lord. They brought first fruits as holy offering to God and gave them to the priest. In addition, this term also refers to the best quality or choicest or fullness as a tribute to God.

New Testament Backgrounds

The NT usage of ἀπαρχή (beginning or first) is exclusively figurative. This term occurs 9 times in the NT, of which 7 instances are in Pauline epistles. The followings are the expositions of each occurrences that help to draw a better understanding and view of the meaning of first fruits in the Book of Revelation.

Romans Epistle

The Greek word ἀπαρχή is found three times in the Epistle to Romans. Twice in the form of genitive case (ἀπαρχή, Rom. 11:16; 16:5) and once in the form of accusative (ἀπαρχήν, Rom. 8:23). The phrase τὴν ἀπαρχὴν τοῦ πνεύματος can be understood in two meanings. The genitive of τοῦ πνεύματος functions as exegetical translated “the first fruits which is the Spirit” and the second can be understood as partitive which means “the first bestowal of the Spirit.”

Noted to the broader context, Paul may try to say to the Romans Christian to have strong hope because Christians are already “sons of God” (vv. 14-17, although, the Romans Christians had experienced suffering. The Spirit, in this sense, is both

²⁸This term specifically refers to dough (Num. 15:20,21; Ezek 44:30; Neh. 10:38), grain (Lev. 23:10; Det. 20:4; 2 Chr. 31:5), to new wine (Deut. 18:4; 2 Chr. 31:5), to oil (Deut. 18:4; 2 Chr. 31:5), to honey (2 Chr. 31:5), to “all the produce of the land” (2 Chr. 31:5), to “the fruit of every tree” (Neh. 10:38), and even to wool (Deut 18:3).

the “first installment” of salvation and the “pledge” that guarantees the remaining stages of that salvation.²⁹

Another usage of the word ἀπαρχή is to bring of Paul’s confidence of the future Israel. The metaphor of first part of Rom. 11:16 εἰ δὲ ἡ ἀπαρχὴ ἁγία, καὶ τὸ φύραμα· is taken from Num. 12:17-21. In this passage, the Lord commands the Israelites, after they enter Canaan, to offer from the “first fruits” of the “lump of dough” that they use to bake their bread to God. Paul’s may point that the holiness of the first part of the dough extends to the whole of lump of dough. Thus the meaning of ἀπαρχή in this verse is to give a quality or fullness of offering as a tribute to God.³⁰

The last ἀπαρχή usage in Romans is found in Rom. 16:5. This section discusses Paul does general exhortation with commands to individuals, families, and house churches. He greet to Epaenetus who is “the first fruits of Asia for Christ.” Although Epaenetus is mentioned nowhere in the NT. By calling him “my beloved one” indicates that Paul knows him very well. In addition, in calling him the “first fruits of Asia,” Paul may refer that he was the first convert in Roman province of Asia.³¹ If it is so, the function of ἀπαρχή refers to series of action.

The First Epistle to the Corinthians

1 Cor. 15:20-28 declare that Christ has been raised. Key to Paul’s explanation of the resurrection is the idea that the risen Christ is “the first fruits” (ἀπαρχή) of those who have fallen asleep (vv. 20,23). The phrase ἀπαρχή τῶν κεκοιμημένων. (first fruits of those who have fallen asleep) indicates that ἀπαρχή function as predicate nominative and τῶν κεκοιμημένων. in the form of perfect participle middle genitive masculine plural as substantival deponent. In verse 23, the function of ἀπαρχή, as nominative apposition, and Χριστός as subject nominative.

The lexical analysis shows that the resurrection of Christ is the pledge or guarantee to those who purchased at the Cross. Paul uses the concept here to support the idea that the first fruits are a harvest that preceded, and point toward, the main harvest. Christ resurrection, therefore, was a guarantee that a larger resurrection harvest was coming.³²

The Letter of James

²⁹Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 519.

³⁰William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of Romans* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1905), 326.

³¹Moo, 700.

³²W. Larry Richards, *1 Corinthians: The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1997), 261.

Paul uses the term “first fruits” in Jam. 1:8 that the people of God are chosen among His creatures. The clause εἰς τὸ εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἀπαρχὴν τινα τῶν αὐτοῦ κτισμάτων may translated “that we might be a kind of first fruits of His creation.” The construction εἰς τὸ + infinitive is a strong final clause expressing the purpose or goal for God creation. Hence, the translation “a kind of first fruits” indicates the chosen among many of God’s creation. Scot McKnight sees that the ἀπαρχὴ here refers to “God gives birth to the messianic community into the world as a kind of first fruits ‘the word of truth.’”³³

In sum, Paul speaks of one of his converts as “the first fruits in Asia for Christ (Rom. 16:5), of “the house of Stephanas” as “the first fruits of Achaia” (1 Cor 16:15), and the Thessalonians Christians as “the first fruits for salvation” (2 Thess. 2:3). Further, “not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). Then, “if the part of the dough is offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy” (Rom. 11:16). Finally, “by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of His creation.” (Jam. 1:8). Paul and James see the ecclesial community as the “first fruits” of God’s large scale redemption of the world. It is possible James thinks “the first fruits” is the Jewish messianic community, while for Paul it is the first generation, chosen people, including Gentiles, who indwelt ecclesial community.

The “First Fruits” in Revelation 14:4

Greek Text and Translation

οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ μετὰ γυναικῶν οὐκ ἐμολύνθησαν, παρθένοι γάρ εἰσιν, οὗτοι οἱ ἀκολουθοῦντες τῷ ἀρνίῳ ὅπου ἂν ὑπάγῃ. οὗτοι ἡγοράσθησαν ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀπαρχὴ τῷ θεῷ καὶ τῷ ἀρνίῳ,

These are those who have not been defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the lamb wherever he goes. These were bought out of mankind as first fruits to God and to the Lamb.

Literary Setting and Linguistic Analysis

Immediately prior to this passage, John has been given a vision that depicts the rise of the unholy trinity (The Dragon, the Sea Beast, and the Land Beast) and their subsequent assault on the church in chapters 12 and 13. The forces of evil were able to conquer and kill anyone who remained loyal to God and refused to take the mark of the Beast. This was an endurance of God’s people.

In the first five verses of Rev. 14 John sees a vision about the characteristics and reward of the faithful people. They are standing with the Lamb on the Mount of Zion. The victory of those who condemned and persecuted in chapter 13 are with Jesus. Instead of mark of the beast on their foreheads or their right hands these

³³Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2011), 131.

people bear the name of the Lamb and of the Father on their foreheads. Jesus has bought them.

According to the context, Rev. 14:1-5 is in the central piece of the great controversy. Sabuin puts this context in a chiastic structure as the following:

A. The beginning of the conflict (11:19-12:12)

B. The works of the three beasts (12:13-13:18)

C. The Lamb's victory and the 144,000 (14:1-5)

B'. The works of the three angels (14:6-13)

A'. The end of the conflict (14:14-14:4)³⁴

Looking to the literary structure, the victory of the Lamb is in the center in the structure. According to this structure, the beginning of the conflict (A) may come to the end (A') because of the victory of the Lamb (C). The battle done by the three beasts (B) which is countered by the work done by the three angels (B'). The center of the structure (C) also suggests that the final result of the conflict is the victory of the Lamb and an eternal togetherness of the Lamb and the saints as "the first fruits."

Further, the message of verse 4 has close relationship with verse 3. There are three descriptions of verse 4 that each description is introduced with οὗτοί or "these". The demonstrative pronoun οὗτοί refers back to οἱ ἠγορασμένοι (the ones who are bought or purchased or redeemed) at the end of verse 3. It begins with an adjectival perfect participle in which the force of the perfect connotes the completion of action. Then, demonstrative pronoun in this sentence function to call attention of designed persons.³⁵ The third description in verse 4 emphasizes the completion of redemption.

God's people in this context "were purchased or bought from humanity as first fruits to God and to the Lamb." The phrase of τῷ θεῷ καὶ τῷ ἀρνίῳ, in the form of dative with passive may express agency "by God and the Lamb." However, it is better to see God and the Lamb as those to whom the redeemed are presented as "first fruit" since the datives do not directly follow the verb.

Interpretation and Relevance

The context of Rev. 14 shows that the 144,000 is a group people of God who has passed the tribulation in Rev. 13. They are "purchased from the earth (4:3) and from the mankind (4:4). They did not take a part to defile themselves with the "women" the "great harlot" of Rev. 17:1 and 14:8. This group has accepted the three angels' messages and will take place immediately before the second coming of Jesus.

The NT follows the OT in describing the believer as "the first" among many, meaning that God will continue to bless the harvest (of souls). Similar to this passage is 1 Cor. 15:20, where Christ in his resurrection is "the first fruits of those who have died"). He was the guarantee that all the redeemed would follow him. In Rom. 11:16, the conversion of the Gentiles is seen as the first of a great harvest: "If the part of the

³⁴Richard A. Sabuin, *Syllabus for NTST 670 The Book of Revelation*, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, 2007.

³⁵Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, "ou-toj" *Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Baker's Greek New Testament Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), BibleWorks, v.8.

dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy. If the root is holy, so are the branches.” Thus, here the 144,000 are the saints of the tribulation period seen as an offering to God guaranteeing the final harvest of all the believers (14:14–16).³⁶

Moreover, this group of people is the ones redeemed from humanity “the first fruits to God and to the Lamb.” This is the third characteristic. By shedding his blood on Calvary’s cross, Jesus paid the debt to set his people free from the curse of sin and guilt. There are two explanations. First, when the Israelites harvested the first ears of the grain harvest and consecrated them to the Lord, they expected the rest of the harvest to follow. Thus, Paul writes that the members of Stephanas’s household were the first fruits in Achaia (1 Cor. 16:15). The implication of this relation is that he expected the rest of the harvest to come in the near future. A second interpretation applies the term first fruits to the entire entity, the totality of the 144,000 wholly offered in thankfulness to God and the Lamb. The expression can refer to “the totality of God’s people as an offering set apart to God” Thus, the sum total belongs to God.³⁷

Conclusion

There are two significant meanings regarding the “first fruit” in the context of Rev. 14:4. First, the 144,000 is the best quality or choicest or fullness of God’s people as a tribute and offering to God. They are the saint that will be harvested in the end time. Second, the “first fruits” here indicates that a larger harvest will be gathered and that they are not only ones to be redeemed and saved. They are the representative of God’s saints that has “redeemed from humanity” (14:3-4).

³⁶Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 530.

³⁷Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, vol. 20, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, Accompanying Biblical Text Is Author's Translation., New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953-2001), 405.

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